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ABSTRACT

Project Mentor examined mentoring for career advancement to answer questions about the mentoring of women and minorities. Twenty chief executive officers and high-level administrators were selected as mentors. Mentors chose a person in their organization whom they perceived as having potential to advance to top levels of management to mentor self-consciously. Anecdotal reports were collected from mentors and mentees and indepth interviews were conducted with mentors before or at the beginning of the mentoring experience and after it was officially over. Mentees were also interviewed after the experience. Data suggested four critical factors, above and beyond competence and potential, that mentors use, knowingly and unknowingly, in selecting potential mentees: fit, risk, predictability, and payoff. The research suggested that use of these factors in screening potential mentees helps explain why women may receive less mentoring and have a harder time attracting mentors. Women tended to get lower scores in fit, predictability, and payoff than similarly able and qualified men and higher scores in risk, which is more likely to put their total scores outside the mentor's "comfort zone." A construct of how mentoring works and the components of the construct emerged from the research. Further tests of its validity were seen as necessary. (YLB)

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WHY WOMEN AREN'T MENTORED

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WHY WOMEN AREN'T MENTORED

In the literature on advancement to top levels of management and administration, mentoring is seen as critical to success (Adam, 1986; Levinson, 1977). It has been argued that "Everyone Who Makes It Has A Mentor" (Collins & Scott, 1978), that nearly all routes to the executive suite require mentoring (Jennings, 1971), and that those who are mentored do better than those who are not (Queralt, 1981; Roche, 1979). Speizer (1981) noted, "The idea that a role model, mentor, or sponsor is a prerequisite for success has achieved the sudden recognition that makes it appear self-evident."

Studies of successful managers and administrators document the presence and perceived importance of mentors in influencing upward advancement (Collins, 1983; Moore, 1982; Dickson, 1983; Kousa, 1984; Vaudrin, 1983; Fenske, 1986; Leizar, 1984; McNeer, 1981; Missirian, 1980; Queralt, 1981; Villani, 1983; Adam, 1986). Epstein's (1970) logic is especially compelling. "At higher levels in an organization there are few, if any, objective tests of competence. At those levels status judges in the profession determine who is and who is not competent." Clearly mentoring is one way by which a "status judge" can make effective decisions about competence.

"If sponsors are important for the success of men in organizations, they seem absolutely essential for women (Kanter, 1977)." Commenting on the low percent of women who hold high level

positions in corporate America (6%), Klemesrud (1983) observed:

> "One way they (women) can begin to do better is to know what men know . . . and what men know is that if you want to get ahead, you should find someone senior in the corporation who will give your career upward mobility, introduce you to the corporate structure and give you the seal of approval that you belong."[9]

Notwithstanding the need women have to be mentored in order to reach top levels of management (Fowler, 1982; Speizer, 1981; Boulton, 1980; Epstein, 1970; Adam, 1986), women (and minorities) appear to be mentored less frequently and to have a harder time getting mentors than (white) males (Moore, 1982; Levinson, 1977; Kanter, 1977).

To say that this occurs because they are women begs the question. If indeed women are mentored less frequently and have a harder time getting mentors, how does the process operate to achieve this result? What criteria guide the selection of mentees (junior persons perceived as having potential), and how are these criteria applied to males and females? What might cause females to be overlooked or passed over in the process?

PROJECT MENTOR

These, along with other questions about mentoring, and particularly the mentoring of women and minorities, guided the development of PROJECT MENTOR. Funded by a grant from the Women's Educational Equity Act Program, PROJECT MENTOR sought to examine mentoring for career advancement in-depth, to answer some of the many unanswered questions about mentoring, and to produce a manual for mentors that would increase the likelihood that women and minorities

would be mentored by making the process explicit and dealing directly with issues involved in cross-race, cross-gender mentoring.

Twenty chief executive officers and high level administrators were selected from a list of nominees solicited widely. The participants were drawn from regional business and industry, government, and higher education, and were selected for their reputation for identifying and nurturing talent in their organizations.

The CEO's and administrators were brought together as a group on two occasions, one prior to a self-conscious mentoring experience that was a required part of PROJECT MENTOR, and one following the mentoring experience. On the first occasion, the mentors identified and explored the part mentoring played in their career, the nature of mentoring relationships as they perceived them, problems and concerns that interfere with mentoring, and issues and concerns posed in cross-race, cross-sex mentoring.

Mentors were asked to choose a person in their organization, preferably a woman and/or minority, that they perceived as having potential to advance to top levels of management, to mentor self-consciously, i.e., looking at the process as they went about the process. Following the mentoring experience, both mentors and mentees were brought together to share what had happened, to identify the problems and concerns encountered, and to reflect more deeply on the process. Anecdotal reports were collected from mentors and mentees and in-depth interviews were conducted with mentors before or at the beginning of the mentoring experience, and after it was officially,

although not necessarily actually, over. In-depth interviews were also held with mentees in this "after" period. Transcriptions of the group meetings and individual interviews and reports from the mentors and mentees provided data for analysis. These data were analyzed in terms of a variety of questions, including the ones raised in this paper.

The data suggest that there are four critical factors, above and beyond competence and potential, which mentors use, knowingly and unknowingly, in selecting potential mentees. These factors are:

1. fit
2. risk
3. predictability
4. payoff

FIT

Organizational "fit" refers to the degree to which the potential mentee matches the organization, i.e., shares the goals and values (philosophical fit) and looks like present holders of high level positions (physical fit). The higher up the position is in the organization, the less room there is for divergence from fit. Fit is important to organizations as a way to (1) ensure perpetuation of the organization, and (2) to project a congruent corporate image. Ideally, potential mentees must physically look like, dress like, talk like, and act like the conceptualized image. As one mentor said,"He must look good, look like an executive."

In some instances this image is clearly defined; in others it is vague and amorphous. "I look at these people, watch them, and check them off," in the words of a mentor. Judgments about "physical fit" are clearly subjective, but relatively easy to make. All of the hoopla about "dressing for success" relates to physical imaging.

Philosophical fit is equally important, but harder to get at. "I want to know how they think . . . whether they think as I do." Obviously, it is not as easy to judge this. It is possible to mask one's actual beliefs, making them difficult to discern. Further, who fits and how, is determined by the top level executive's sense of appropriateness. The executive may prize "towing" the line or people who push the limits. "I like a person to be close to the line, pushing the limits," said one mentor. "If he pushes the limits too far," he continued, "he's considered a renegade, and he won't succeed."

One mentor summed up the application and implications of organizational fit in the selection of mentees. "I think I know what it takes to be president. My vision is close." His vision may or may not be close, but if he is choosing his replacement, his "vision" is the image the next president will project.

RISK

Risk refers to the potential "harm" that may accrue to the mentor as a result of identification with the mentee. Risk has an external and an internal dimension.

For good or ill, the mentor is identified with the mentee. This constitutes the external dimension. Whatever the mentee does reflects on the mentor. Judgments about the mentee become judgments about the mentor. In a real sense, the mentor's ability to recognize and promote talent is under scrutiny by peers. The mentor's judgment is on the line with colleagues. Ironically, with so much at stake, the mentor becomes responsible for the mentee's behavior, behavior over which the mentor may have little control. The mentor's judgment is being critically evaluated on the basis of another's actions.

For this reason, while the potential payoff is great in terms of enhancing the mentor's reputation, the risk is equally great that the mentor's reputation may be negatively affected by the choice of mentee. "Watch who I go to lunch with," an executive told one of the mentors. "I don't like to associate with those who are not as good as I think they should be." If they're that careful about whom they're seen with at lunch, clearly they're even more cautious about whom they choose to mentor.

Mentoring involves intense scrutiny of the mentor by the mentee. This constitutes the internal dimension of risk. In mentoring, the sponsor is exposed. The mentor's decision-making behaviors, manner of interacting, and even more importantly, ambitions, are exposed to the mentee in a way they would not be in normal, daily interaction. This involves risk. The mentor is allowing the mentee to learn the person "behind the image." "When you mentor, you let down the barriers, let someone really see. They'll see your vulnerable points," said one executive.

In selecting mentees, mentors try to minimize the external risk by choosing persons who are likely to be successful and/or to be perceived as potential "winners" by others. At the same time they seek to ameliorate the internal risk, since it cannot be avoided, by choosing persons whom they believe they can "trust," whose discretion can be counted on.

PREDICTABILITY

Predictability refers to the feeling of assurance that a mentee's actions and reactions will fall within an acceptable range. Predictability seems similar to fit and risk, but is a separate and discreet factor. Fit is concerned with the match between the mentee and the organization. Predictability is about the match between the mentor and mentee. Risk is about the mentor. Predictability is about the mentee.

Predictability relates to how well the mentor's and potential mentee's personalities mesh, how much they like each other, and are personally comfortable with one another. "We have to be compatible," argued a mentor. "They don't have to be in my image, but I have to admire them," said another. "There's a little bit of something that clicks on and off. Then I know," said another.

Predictability goes beyond personality, however, to issues of commonalities in ways of thinking and operating, commonalities which ensure that the mentor can predict (therefore depend on) how the mentee will behave. "There are rules about when to participate," remarked a mentor talking about an unsuccessful mentoring experience

in which he felt the mentee "violated the etiquette of the situation." Mentors seek to avoid this unpredictability and source of possible apprehension. In the words of a mentor reflecting on how the mentee was selected, "We think enough alike that we'll react in the same ways."

Mentors don't want to have to worry that the mentee will act inappropriately or unacceptably. It increases the risk and adds a dimension to the mentee-mentor relationship with which mentors prefer not to deal. They prefer it to be a given, thus they tend to select mentees who are perceived to be predictable.

PAYOFF

Payoff refers to the potential gain/benefit that accrues to the mentor as a result of the relationship with the mentee. Mentoring requires a heavy investment of time and energy by the mentor, and such an investment begs rewarding. "I had to decide who was worth the time," said a mentor. "If this mentoring experience is going to work," argued another, "there has to be something in it for both of us." "You have to ask yourself, what's in it for me?" offered another.

Payoff comes to the mentor from three possible sources: (1) recognition within the organization for identifying and being associated with a "winner," (2) access to something the mentee has or has access to, and (3) future benefits that the mentee may be able to provide.

Payoff may derive from being able, in some small measure, to "claim credit for the accomplishments of the mentee, from being recognized as a person who can really "pick 'em," from being identified with a mentee that performs well. "The _____ I worked with is now president of ____. I'm really proud of that," said one mentor. "It's an accomplishment for me if I can point to that _____ as one of my proteges," said another.

In some cases a potential mentee has access to something which can enlarge the knowledge, experience, credentials, or stature of the mentor, e.g., community visibility, political or social "clout." A mentee brings that access to the mentoring relationship. This adds to the attractiveness of the potential mentee.

Mentoring involves brokering, sponsoring mentees into positions. The mentor has actively done things that resulted in the mentee's advancement. In a very real sense, the mentee is indebted to the mentor, owes the mentor, and payoff comes in the form of extending the mentor's network to include the one the mentee has and comes to have in the future. Future payoffs of a tangible nature may come in the form of invited consultancies, involvement in the mentee's organization, and recommendations for board appointments or positions.

Payoff is assessed in terms of future success. The more successful the potential mentee is seen as likely to be, the greater the payoff is perceived to be likely to be.

SCREENING

Lest we leave the reader in any doubt, it is important to affirm a point we made only in passing. Competence and potential are important factors in the mentee selection process. They are basic requirements which determine initial visibility and, therefore, consideration of a mentee by a mentor. Their role is important and obvious, however, alone, they do not determine selection. Rather, they are prerequisites for another level of screening, one in which assessment of fit, risk, predictability, and payoff play a major role. These factors are imposed over and above competence and potential, and serve as criteria for final selection.

In applying the four factors to potential mentees, mentors go through an often unconscious process of scoring a candidate in each area and calculating a general overall score. Mentors look to select mentees with high scores in fit, predictability, and payoff, and a low score in risk. However, variation from the ideal does not necessarily rule out a potential mentee. The mentee may be very high in one area, e.g., payoff, offsetting moderate scores, or even a low score, in fit, predictability, or risk. A high score in one area can bring the total score up to an acceptable range. While it sounds terribly mechanistic, it is not. Subjective judgments are being made and the mentor is "weighing" the importance of the factor and the mentee's assessed score in the area. There is a range of acceptable scores, a "comfort zone," so to speak, and the mentee's scores must fall within the comfort zone.

WOMEN AND MENTORING

How does all this apply when are the potential mentees? Our research suggests that the use of these factors in screening potential mentees helps explain why women may receive less mentoring and have a harder time attracting mentors. Women tend to get lower scores in fit, predictability, and payoff than similarly able and qualified men, and higher scores in risk, which is more likely to put their total scores outside the mentor's "comfort zone."

WOMEN AND FIT

Organizations, as our study suggests, strive for "likeness." Thus to "look like" those in the inner circle is one test of the right to be included. "There is a stereotype. You must look and behave a certain way if you are to make it to the top," said a mentor. Women, by their very nature, do not look like, necessarily act like, nor sound like the males who traditionally hold these upper level positions. Their "differentness" stands out and is perceived as such. Males set the standard for judging physical fit, and females can never quite measure up. One mentor captured the poignancy of this discrepancy. "The thing I found most difficult is . . . she's a woman and black. I'm a man and white."

Beyond physical appearances, females tend to be seen as not "fitting in," as "changing the way we've always done things." In overt and subtle ways, the addition of females changes the dynamics of the situation making conducting "business as usual" impossible. Males believe they have to clean up their language so as not to offend the

sensibilities of females, explain sports analogies, and prove their lack of bias. Decisions once made on tennis courts and golf courses, within the context of social interaction, may now have to be considered during regular business hours. Board meetings may no longer be held at exclusive men's clubs. Organizational issues once reserved for men's rooms must instead be returned to the conference room. Unwittingly, then, females are cast in the role of "spoiler," one who negatively affects the comfortable comraderie and ease of communication shared by those at the highest administrative levels of most organizations. "She was inhibiting of discussion," reflected a mentor.

As noted earlier in the paper, it is difficult for mentors to judge philosophical fit (congruence with the organization), irrespective of the sex of the mentee. Females tend to be subjected to more intense scrutiny than males and there is even less certainty about how to determine "fit." Females in high level positions are still a rarity and they are viewed as "unknown quantities" in organizations. Being able to determine the "meanings" of their behavior and beliefs is perceived as (1) difficult, and (2) different from the way it works with males. Since females are "different," how can one tell if their goals and values are congruent with the organization?" One mentor, in instructing us about the realities of the situation explained, "Men don't necessarily perceive women as loyal or trustworthy . . . They say (to me) 'I don't really understand her. Women are odd creatures.'" Another reported, "Men find it a revelation if women are willing to take a risk."

Given these factors, the ideas and behavior of females tend to be subjected to the most searching scrutiny, in a way those of known quantities would not be. "She was never part of the community," mused a mentor. "She was a woman."

Adding to uncertainties about fit in relation to females is the widely held perception that females harbor a desire to change things, that they are not satisfied with what is, as it is. For mentors who have created the what is or made it because they affirmed what is, the suspicion that females might reject what is fuels the searching scrutiny.

A conceptual principle of psychology suggests that you tend to find what you're looking for in people's behavior. The expectation or possibility that female behavior may be unpredictable or that females are unhappy with what is may well be "father to" finding evidence to support this thesis, rather than to refute it.

Given the discrepancies in physical fit and uncertainties in philosophical fit, it is hardly surprising that females tend to score significantly lower than males in assessments of fit.

WOMEN AND RISK

Mentoring is a "risking" business, whether the mentee is male or female. The mentor's judgment, as explained, is on the line and the mentor shares responsibility for the mentee's behaviors and reactions. The risk increases significantly when the mentee is female, and the added risk is a function of gender.

There is added visibility for females who hold executive positions, because they are few and "different." This visibility leads to sex-differentiated processes for judging risk. If a male mentee succeeds, or fails for that matter, it is an individual matter. It has no reference to males as a group and their potential for success or failure. If a female mentee fails, the failure is seen as both an individual matter and a finding about females as a group - females can't. If a female succeeds, it does not demonstrate that females can, rather it demonstrates that this female is "the exception," and therefore, not like most females. Thus, in choosing to mentor a female, one takes on the added burden of the group.

Unlike same-sex mentoring, cross-sex mentoring, in particular male mentor/female mentee, seems to invite a great deal of speculation about the motives of the mentor. This may result in motives being ascribed to the relationship which are unsubstantiated and unwarranted. "People choose to believe there were other reasons I got thrown into the game," said one mentee. "In a word, sex." "He will never go alone with a female to lunch. The ground rules are, no social interaction alone," said another mentee of her mentor. "Men who work for me drop things off at my home. With a woman vice-president it would be a problem." Clearly there are great risks to the mentor's reputation in choosing a female mentee, risks which may be beyond his control and besides his intent and behavior.

Mentees, of course, do not enjoy equal status with mentors. There is, however, some indication that women and minorities cannot be

seen as ever achieving equal status. "There is prejudice about women and minorities," observed a mentor, "and it rears its ugly head. Basic discrimination exists . . . Many don't see women and minorities as equal." And from a successful mentee, "In their minds you never reach equality, never can be equal, despite your position or salary."

If there is some truth to this perception, and we believe there is, mentors see greater risk in mentoring females because they may be choosing persons who may never be or be perceived to be equals, to be colleagues in the truest sense. To accord equal status to females may prove uncomfortable for mentors acculturated to expect disparity in status between males and females. Even if they do not accept this judgment personally, they see that others of importance do.

Not unreasonably, mentors seek to protect themselves and their way of doing things from general exposure. They do not choose to give away trade secrets or explain their motives. It is risky to expose oneself to anyone. It is even riskier to expose oneself to someone viewed as unpredictable and unlikely to become an equal.

These added dimensions, which apply only to females, result in their getting markedly higher scores on the risk factor than are achieved by the majority of males. Unavoidably, then, they start with a large deficit in this area.

WOMEN AND PREDICTABILITY

If, as our research suggests, predictability is an important criterion applied to potential mentees, since women are perceived to be unpredictable, they are at some disadvantage in this criterion when

compared with males. "There are rules about when to participate, what their (mentee) role is. In general, they (men) know. They don't say much," said a male mentor. "You have to prove you are not going to embarrass them," said a female mentee. "I conscientiously observed her in situations of high stress," said a male mentor. "That's the way you see if she passes that test."

Predictability is concerned with commonalities between the mentor and mentee in ways of thinking and operating as well as the mesh of personalities. There is a perception that males and females think and operate differently in high level positions. This perception may or may not have a basis in fact or be true of a particular female, nevertheless it appears to be applied to all females. "You never arrive," said a female mentee, ". . . regardless of the verbal message that you're all right, the reality is you're not. You can never stop proving yourself for a minute." "You have to disarm all the stereotypes," said another female mentee. "Sometimes I get tired of doing it." Thus, females tend to score lower in predictability than males.

WOMEN AND PAYOFF

Although females have made significant progress in administrative and executive positions, they are still pioneers. Given the statistics, it is not surprising that the payoff score for the typical female is lower than that of the typical male. Payoff refers to the benefit, gains, that come to the mentor as a result of the mentoring relationship.

Males and females share equal potential for providing access to something from which the mentor can benefit most immediately, and, to some extent, the potential for enhancing the reputation of the mentor for picking a "winner." There is some suggestion that even when females complete challenging assignments successfully, they are less likely than males to receive the consequent professional attention and career boost (Epstein, 1977). In considering female mentees, even those perceived to have "winning" qualities, mentors may be aware that women will have to overcome more barriers to advancement.

Females are not seen as providing equal potential for future gain. On average, females advance more slowly than males, and are less likely to advance to the top levels of management. Potential payoff, therefore, is more likely to be delayed and less, factors which affect a potential female mentee's payoff score.

HOW IT WORKS

When the factors of fit, risk, predictability, and payoff are applied to potential female mentees they tend to result in a different pattern of scores than when applied to potential male mentees. Females tend to score lower in fit, predictability, and payoff, and higher in risk than males, and to accumulate scores that put them outside the mentor's "comfort zone." The figure below provides a visual representation of this construct. It shows a profile of an ideal mentee, a varied score mentee who still falls within the comfort zone, a typical male mentee, and a typical female mentee.

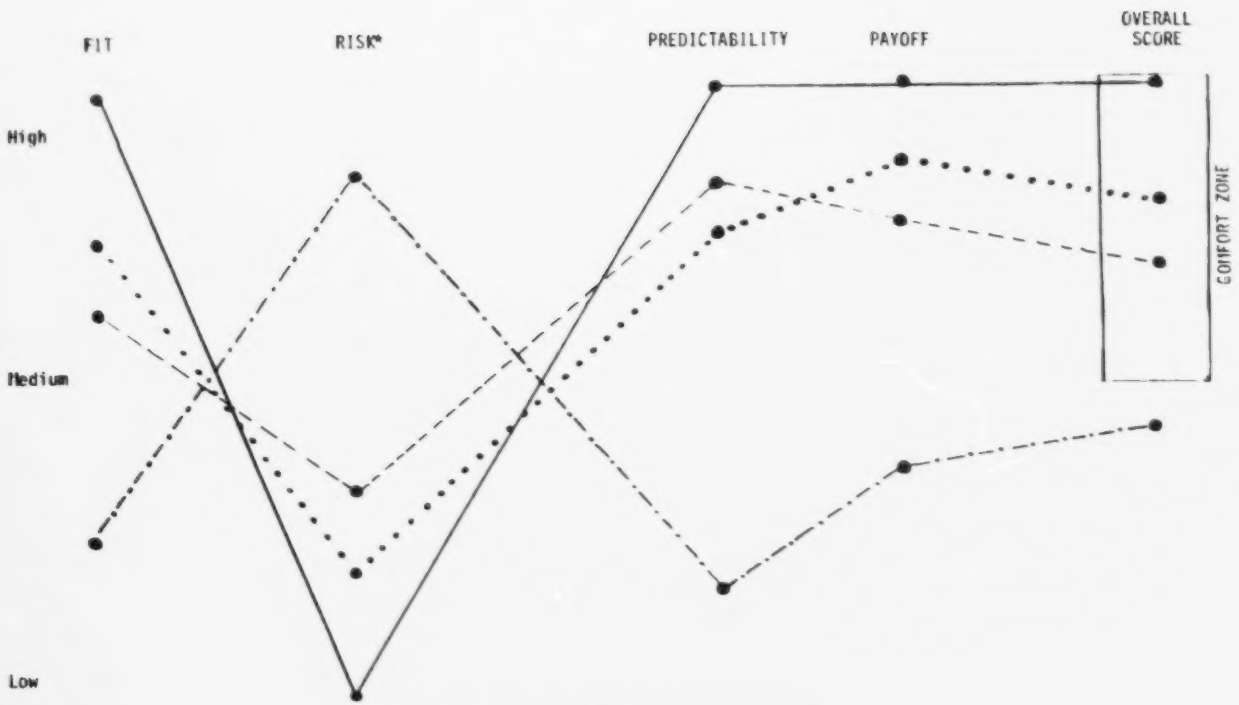

FIGURE 1. CONSTRUCT FOR MENTEE SELECTION

——— ideal mentee
------ varied score mentee
..... typical male candidate
-.-.-. typical female candidate

*The lowest possible score for risk is the ideal score.

The ideal mentee (———), i.e., one who has perfect scores in all four factors, is probably rarely, if ever, found. Nevertheless, it remains the standard by which candidates are judged. Candidates are much more likely to have variable scores (------), which can still result in their total score falling within the comfort zone. The typical male score (·····) follows this variable score pattern and falls within the "comfort zone." In contrast, the typical female score (-·-·-) follows a variable pattern, but diverges sufficiently to result in a total score which misses the "comfort zone." Clearly, males can be eliminated by earning scores that fall outside the comfort zone, and females can earn scores that fall within the comfort zone, however, the typical female's scores fall outside this zone, and the typical male's scores fall inside this zone.

This construct of "how it works" and the components of the construct, emerged from our research on entoring. Further tests of the validity of the model as it operates in the field, in business and industry, government, and education are the next order of business. If, however, the process works as we have posited, it would go a long way to explain why females get less mentoring and have a harder time getting mentored than males.

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